

What It Takes to Become a Great Teacher

by Susan Engel

This commentary outlines a fresh approach to recruiting and training good teachers.

Our schools still aren't good enough. What's to be done? Impose more stringent tests to measure children's success? Impose more stringent tests to measure schools' success? Punish bad teachers? Reward good teachers? Make kids wear uniforms? Encourage charter schools? None of these seem to have had any real impact – for instance, in early October of this year it was reported that math scores in this country are stagnant. If you don't think those scores are a good measure of the educational process, take a look at our graduation rate: in 2007 6.2 million students dropped out of high school. We've been circling around the real problem for too long.

Imagine you bought a restaurant where the food was poor, and you wanted to turn things around. You could change the cuisine from French to Italian, serve larger portions, get new dishware, or play music for the customers. But as long as the food remained the same your restaurant would still be bad. How would you change the food? By hiring a good cook, of course. The same is true for schools – all those other modifications are for nothing, if we can't put good teachers into our schools. As Jerome Bruner said, “you can no more make a curriculum that's teacher-proof than you can make a family that's parent-proof.”

If we really want good schools, we need to fill them with great teachers. But first, we have to dispense with the tired debate about whether someone is born a good teacher, or whether good teaching is something anyone can learn. That's like debating whether a surgeon is born a good doctor, or must be taught. Only some people will make good surgeons – they need to be smart enough to get through medical school, have excellent hand eye coordination, and possess the ability to make important decisions under pressure. But no one is a good surgeon without medical training and close supervision from a skilled mentor. The same is true of teachers. Not everyone is cut out to be a teacher – you need to love kids, be smart, have passion and expertise in the discipline you teach, and possess a certain kind of presence and authority that is very hard to learn. But even someone with all these qualities needs training: about how children develop, about how to take a lively idea and weave it into good curriculum, how to make tedious work seem worthwhile to children, how to give students feedback, how to handle difficult children, how to assess what a student has learned, how to talk to parents, and how to keep teaching well when buried by bureaucracy.

We need to find a way to attract smart, energetic, passionate people to the teaching profession. How can we do this? (While good teacher pay is necessary, it is not sufficient. There are plenty of professions that don't pay as well as radiology, corporate law, or banking, but attract skilled, passionate, and committed people: art, clergy, cabinet making, and journalism, to name just a few, and I can think of quite a few professions that reward a lack of intellect and wisdom with a lot of money). If I were Bill Gates (or someone like him) here is what I would do: I would endow several of the best colleges and universities to create a new kind of teacher education program. Entrance to these programs would require good grades from a liberal arts institution (it's hard to be a good teacher if you yourself are not well educated), a well written and lively essay, and an intensive interview. The goal would be to attract ambitious, smart, thoughtful people, who demonstrate some of the interpersonal qualities essential to good teaching: comfort and ease with others, a genuine love of kids, and confidence in one's own capacities. Programs in clinical psychology know that interviews matter when you are selecting people whose work depends on connecting with others. Programs in teaching should borrow this notion.

Often my most promising students decide to go to other kinds of graduate school which offer them greater financial support, or more money in the future. Many public schools offer decent salaries and great schedules in the long run, but we need to make teacher training more alluring in the short run. These new model programs should be very hard to get into, but should also be free to admitted students. Successful completion of the graduate program should include a stipend for the first three years of teaching in a public school. That's a lot of support. But one good teacher is worth ten good assessment tools.

Once we've attracted a talented pool of students, we need to prepare them differently than we have in the past. They need to learn a lot about the things they want to teach, more than they could have learned in college. They also need to learn how to observe children, and think about what they are seeing. They need to learn how to draw

upon research and theory to come up with new solutions to whatever problems face them in the classroom. Teaching students should spend much more time on the bookends of traditional programs: engaging in far reaching intellectual inquiry about education, children, and the material they hope to teach on the one hand, and intensive hands on supervised practice on the other. That would leave less time for mechanics, which is fine, since those things can be learned fairly quickly by excellent students.

By one measure, teachers encounter more than 200 unexpected moments in a day. Unlike the surgeon whose clients are unconscious, a teacher's young clients are all very much conscious. This is why teachers must devote time, energy, and effort to reflecting on their own practice. Young teachers need to learn how to record their daily encounters, explore their own motivations with specific children, think open mindedly about what might help a student improve, and understand what to do when they feel convinced they were talking to their students in a friendly way during math class, only to see on the video tape that they were talking *at* the children in a loud monotone. They need help learning how to change when things aren't working.

Teachers must also learn about children – they need more than a course in child development. Two years ago I watched an excellent 4th grade teacher in Hoboken, NJ. All of his specific lessons and rules were quirky. He did not teach by the book. The children had lots of freedom to choose their own activities. He spent a good deal of his time recording what they were doing, rather than instructing them. They spent a lot of their time making things, rather than practicing skills. He held meetings of the whole group when there was conflict between children, but rarely identified rules, or handed out consequences. As part of his graduate work he had studied developmental psychology in depth. He knew how to think and read about children. His students behaved well, loved school, and learned a lot.

Creating a critical mass of well educated, well prepared, ambitious new teachers is essential. It is also vital that these student-teachers have a chance to develop their skills before they are put in charge of a tough group of kids in a school with problems. Medical students go through a rigorous curriculum in med school, but that's only the beginning. They then spend at least two years working as interns in hospitals, under the guidance of experienced skilled doctors. Schools should offer the same kind of apprenticeships. No current program that I know of provides enough opportunities for young teachers in the following critical areas: the chance to teach along side of a skilled teacher, participate in intense supervision with expert mentors, and a peer group strong enough to make teaching interesting and rewarding even when the circumstances are tough.

Because having like-minded colleagues is so essential to young teachers, if I were Bill Gates I would provide specific public schools with financial incentives to hire seven or more of these newly prepared teachers within a three year period. This way they would feel they were part of a robust group of highly selective, promising, and able teachers. I've seen what happens in schools where there are seven or more smart, talented, well educated teachers who share ideas about their work. Even with lousy facilities and difficult students, the teachers love what they do and continue to be great at it even in tough circumstances.

Finally, young teachers need to be in serious conversation with other smart talented teachers. Most schools leave almost no time for open ended discussion about education, and most teachers have no precedent for initiating such conversations. A new teacher who makes conversation about learning and teaching a priority will be much better prepared than the one who knows four different ways to organize a lesson plan book. But this is a complex habit, and one that takes deliberate effort to acquire, and should be actively cultivated during training.

The demands facing teachers are enormous- not just because schools are inadequately funded but also because of this society's unprecedented expectations for the education system: teachers are supposed to provide guidance, information, skills, and motivation to a huge and diverse population of children. Meeting this challenge requires the most talented young people in our society with the most rigorous training. Recently I heard from a surgeon who is giving up his medical practice to become a public school teacher. He said, "I've already done the second most important profession. Now I want to do the first."